No. 23. *On the uncertainty of Life. For the last Sunday in the Year. Or otherwise.*

Psalm 90th, 12th.

So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom:

As we have now almost arrived at the end of another year, I cannot address you more properly on any subject than the uncertainty of human life, requesting you to beseech the Almighty to give us grace "to "number our days"—not to reveal to us the determinate time of our life—but that we may make a right and true use of the certainty we all of us have of our approaching dissolution.

The Psalm, from which the text is taken, was wrote by Moses, when the children of Israel had provoked the Lord in the wilderness; in consequence of which the Almighty threatened that they should all perish, and that none should reach the promised land, Caleb and Joshua excepted, but should all die in the space of forty years. When the Lord had "brought his "people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and a

" stretched-out arm"—when, during their journey,
" He rained down Manna from heaven, and struck
" the hard Rock that the waters gushed out," in order
to " preserve them alive by a great deliverance—when
" He had brought them to the borders of the promised
" land," and there commanded Moses to send a Ruler
out of every Tribe, that they might report " whether the
" inhabitants were strong or weak, few or many, &
" the land they dwelt in, whether it was good or bad,
" what cities they dwelt in, whether in tents or strong
" holds"—that is, whether in open villages or walled
cities—" and to bring of the fruit of the land, for it
" was almost the time of vintage—and during their
" journey to be of good courage;" after an absence of
forty days, they returned indeed, and " reported of the
" land that it was very good," and produced a cluster
of grapes of prodigious size, and pomegranates & figs,
in confirmation of their report; but added withal, they
despaired of ever getting possession of it, because the in-
habitants were of that warlike complection as to bid de

fiance and death to such an attempt. This conclusion of their account filled the whole people with indignation against Moses, and against the Lord; and they cried, "would God we had died in the land of Egypt, "or would God we had died in this wilderness!" But Joshua & Caleb, "who were of them that searched the "land," remembering the mercies God had shewn them since their departure out of Egypt, would have dissipated their fear, animating them to take courage, "for that "the land they had passed through to search it was an "exceeding good land, and that, if they would not "rebel against the Lord, but put their trust in Him, "He would bring them into this land and give it "them," being the very country He had promised to their fathers, "a land flowing with milk & honey." The people, however, so far from hearkening to their voice, "bade the congregation to stone them with stones." To divert them from a purpose dictated by indignation and exasperated with despair, "the glory of the Lord "appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation and

" shewed hot displeasure amongst them: He sware by
" Himself, saying, that all of them, as they had de-
" sired, save Caleb & Joshua, should die in the wil-
" derness in less than 40 years." You will read the entertaining relation in the 13th and 14th of Numbers. The life of man being by this event so much shortened, Moses composed the Psalm of which my text is a part, beseeching the Almighty, that, as 40 years were the extreme of their life, and many might be called hence much sooner, He would be graciously pleased to prepare them against the awful day of his visitation. So teach us to, &c.

The first argument I shall urge to prevail with you to make the same supplication, is the uncertainty of human life.

So slender is the thread by which the principle of life is sustained, that it is often cut by the most trifling accident. How many, blest with the most robust constitutions, catch disorders, which, though imperceptible in their origin, and disregarded in their progress, are

fatal in their termination?—How many come into the world with the seeds of disease implanted in the habit, which wither & consume the body that contains them? How many fall a sacrifice to their own rashness—to the obstinacy, nay sometimes to the indiscretion and levity of others? How many, employed in business, or amused with innocence, from which, as danger is not perceived, so it is not apprehended, are cut off by the visitation of God? In a word, the food we eat, the air we breathe, the raiment we wear, the ground we tread upon, all, are instruments in the hands of Providence to execute his will and hasten our dissolution.

Now, if we are always "encompassed with so "many and great dangers;" if we are, every moment, liable to such inevitable & fatal attacks, will not prudence dictate & wisdom recommend the method adopted by "the meekest of the sons of men," to beseech Him "in whose hand are the issues of life and death, so "to "teach us to number our days," that whether we are

arrested by "the Pestilence that walketh in darkness," or wounded by "the arrow that flieth in the noon day," we may fall like men not ignorant of the danger; and not unprepared for the event?

But to the uncertainty of human life, let us add, 2dly, the certainty of death.

That we shall all die, our constitutions afford us, from their weakness and debility, the most decisive evidence. Nor can our lives be prolonged to such a period as to justify us in the neglect of preparing for death. Tho' we should live to "the age of three-"score and ten, or fourscore years, they will be days "in which we have no pleasure in them." And is that state to be envied, in which we shall live without pleasure, and die without hope? Could an exemption from death be pleaded by any mortal, some might catch at the shadow of hope that the same favour would be extended to them. "But it is appointed unto all "men once to die." And as death is the prelude to an unchangeable state of happiness or misery — may

the Almighty "so teach us to number our days that "we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." By reflecting on the certainty of death—by anticipating the time when the union between the body & the soul shall be dissolved—when this body shall be turned to dust, and the soul, its inhabitant, shall wing its flight "to "God that gave it"—by anticipating that awful moment, God grant us to live prepared against its approach.

A 2d argument I shall urge to prevail with us to beseech the Almighty to give us grace that "we may "apply our hearts unto wisdom," is the great importance of the state in which we die.

If we die in a state of unrepented sin, "a certain "fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indigna"tion" inevitably awaits us. For to no purpose is the Gospel revealed—to no purpose did our Saviour Jesus Christ come into the world to redeem us and purify us unto good works, if we are at liberty to live in the utter neglect, in the absolute contempt of those rules. He has

prescribed for the government of our lives. Is it fitting that Jesus Christ should take upon Him our nature, be crucified and slain for our sakes, & we refuse to do what He enjoins? Can we persuade ourselves, if we live in the transgression of the commandments, and are to be judged at the last day by the Gospel, that we shall, notwithstanding, be saved? Impossible! No man who ever reads or hears the word of God can amuse himself with an expectation so egregiously deceitful. "Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." If then according to our works we are to be punished or rewarded; and if, when we lie on the bed of death, our comfort is to be derived from "our being made like "unto Jesus Christ;" if we desire to be possessed of the animating assurance that "when we walk through the "valley of the shadow of death, the rod and the staff "of God" will support and comfort us; can we be so infatuated as not to entitle ourselves to this heavenly assistance? By bringing frequently to our reflection

the concluding scene of our lives, we shall naturally be induced to live in such a manner that we may anticipate it without consternation. For as it is a season that must arrive, a trial we must undergo, not to be prepared against its approach is to act in opposition to every principle of reason, to every suggestion of wisdom. To apply our hearts unto wisdom, by rightly numbering our days, or by making a true estimate of life, is to look forward to the time when life shall cease and Eternity commence, and to be able to review our conduct with approbation.

I will trespass a little longer on your patience, whilst I make an application that may be thought not unsuitable, perhaps, to the present season.

As we have almost completed another annual revolution of time, let us be prevailed on to examine seriously our past conduct. Since the commencement of the period which is now expiring, how many of our friends, our relations and acquaintance, have been carried to their graves? Mortality has made a rapid

advance, and has spared neither sex nor age, but, with unrelenting violence, has destroyed helpless innocence & decrepid infirmity, the bloom of beauty and the vigour of health. To the Providence of the Almighty it is owing that we have been spared. Had we been of the number of those who are now in the regions of death, could we have appeared in the presence of our Maker as rational creatures, who had been blessed with a revelation from heaven? Or would the violation of its laws, and the transgression of its commandments "have risen "up against us and condemned us?" Would the profanation of the day dedicated to God's honor, would oaths and imprecations, would drinking, extortion, injustice, slander, deceit, have born their testimony against us? Let us consider what it is to die with any one sin on our head. It is to appear before God-Almighty & make open acknowledgement that we have lived in rebellion against Him, that we have disregarded his laws and renounced his protection. God of his mercy grant that no one here may die in such a situation!

Our lives, we know, are uncertain—this is the last time, it may be, some of us shall be permitted to worship God in this congregation—let us therefore, from this day, begin to amend them.—Let us not enter on another year, without the strongest resolutions, without the most fervent prayers to God, to enable us, by his grace, to live well. Let us, from this day, expel every passion that alienates our heart from God. Let us become his servants, and demonstrate our fidelity by our obedience. Instead of putting off the thoughts of death, let us live, from this day, to learn to die. Let us often contemplate the time "when this mortal shall "put on immortality"—when God-Almighty will send us the summons to appear in his more immediate presence. Whether we may live to enter upon another year we know not; but in all human probability, before the close of it, many of us, who are now here, shall be reduced to dust; shall become as though we had never been. The brightest eyes in this assembly, before that period, may have waxed dim—before that period,

the pleasing prospect of comfort and happiness which many children now behold, by the loss of their affectionate parents, may have vanished——before that period, many tender wives may lament the loss of their indulgent husbands——many distracted husbands be deprived of the dearest objects of their affections!

Such being the uncertainty of human life, let us lay hold on the present opportunity of being reconciled to God, that, if it shall please Him to prolong our lives to the revolution of another year, we may, from this day, date our entrance upon a new existence——we may, from this day, "have ceased to do evil, & have "learned to do well." It will be a day we shall then review, not with despondence, but with cheerfulness: instead of living under the displeasure of God——instead of being subject to the depressions of melancholy and the disquietudes of grief, when we are visited with sickness or overwhelmed with afflictions "we shall fear no evil;" "for God will be our God for ever and ever, He will "be our guide unto death."

'Grant, we beseech Thee, gracsous God! when
'Thou art pleased to call us to Thyself—when that
'awful moment approaches that the pleasures of riches
'and the hardships of poverty shall cease from before
'our eyes—when we are bidding a long adieu to our
'friends, relations, and every thing in this life—
'when we are encompassed with the horrors of death,
'and are about to be launched into eternity—Oh!
'grant, that our spirits may be sustained by a lively
'faith in thy Son Jesus Christ—that the visage of
'death may be disarmed of its terrors—& that we may
'triumphantly enter "into that rest which remaineth
'for the people of God!"

Theop^{s}. J. St. John.

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